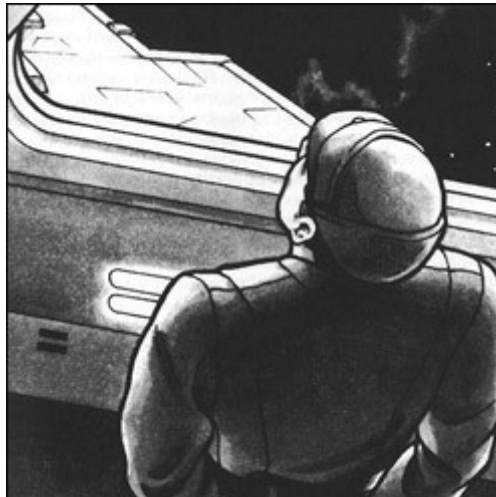


The Longest Fall



By Patricia A. Jackson; Illustrations by Christopher Trevas

The Imperial Star Destroyer *Interrogator* maintained its support position, matching coordinate planes and acceleration bursts with its nav computer specifications. From the observation deck, several levels beneath the flight bridge, the commanding officer stared through the transparisteel platform as the *Imperial II*-class Star Destroyer maneuvered into the mouth of a vacuous, black nebula. Gliding from the sinister shadow of undistinguished space, the *Interrogator* was an impressive sight, a precisely honed dagger tip against the starless backdrop of space.

An advanced point ship, his vessel was moving in to investigate a little-known area of space known as the *Nharqis'I*. The term, despite its romantic appeal, was a crude variation of a lingering smuggler dialect, which he understood to mean "the death place." Starless, featureless, menacing -- the foreboding nebula was a testimonial to seemingly endless continuity.

Chewing nervously at his lower lip, the young captain stared into the faceless void, wishing he could lose himself inside it. The *Nharqis'I* could be no colder or more forbidding a place than the anonymous darkness of Lord Tremayne's waiting room. And the *Nharqis'Al*, a hideous, mythical leviathan that lurked within the nebula, could certainly be no more terrifying an entity than the Emperor's leading High Inquisitor himself.

In the midst of the sparsely furnished, cruelly antiseptic interior of the waiting chamber, the young captain noticed only one chair sitting against the far wall. He wondered how many Imperial officers had sat in that chair and how many had lived to tell about it. The numbers were quite disproportionate to each other, he was certain, and he congratulated his decision not to sit in it.

Though he was not a superstitious man, the captain was confident that he enhanced his chances of survival if Tremayne should come and find him standing in anticipation of this meeting. He had, in fact, been standing, respectfully at attention, for the past three hours, waiting for the Dark Adept to address him personally.

And if his diligence had no bearing at all upon the outcome of their meeting, at least he would have the satisfaction of meeting High Inquisitor Tremayne and his potential execution with a small measure of dignity.

The others died on their feet, his subconscious told him. Admiral Ozzel. Admiral Ranes. Captain Needa. His esteemed mentor and friend, Captain Nolaan. And there were others who did not directly come to mind. *What makes you so different?*

The inability to answer that question brought a hollow, unsettled feeling to the bottom of his stomach. Clapping his hands tightly behind his back, the young captain swayed back and forth on his heels, an impatient habit learned on the bridge and honed by the daily stresses of commanding a ship in the Emperor's most prestigious war fleet. It was a peculiar fixation on motion that he was working to eliminate and had regulated it with some success. In any case, the swaying did not trouble him quite so much as the violent tremors that shook his hands.

The captain brushed his fingers over the front of his uniform and straightened the insignia, chiding himself for allowing a physical manifestation of his concerns to appear. The last impression he wanted to make before leaving this world was the empty illusion of fear.

Fear. That was not the way to run a ship or motivate its crewmen and support personnel. Fear inspired mistakes, tension among the crew, which accounted for more mistakes and erroneous decisions in judgment. Ultimately, the end result of such tension was failure and more fear. Respect was what they taught in the Academy, respect and subject to authority.

Discipline is the immediate compliance to all orders, undeviating respect for authority, and above all self-reliance.

The young captain grinned as the memorized definition came to mind -- a recurring echo from his days at the Academy. He remembered the fear of those early clays of training, when everything had seemed so beyond reach. He remembered his initial clumsiness with orders and superior officers, the ambiguity of doubt, and the gradual breaking down and re-establishment of his pride. There was indeed a certain arrogance in the mastery of discipline, the mastery of self. There was incalculable self-satisfaction in obeying orders, respecting the High Command, and in being recognized for the ability to think clearly in a crisis. These things combined evoked respect, not fear. High Inquisitor Tremayne knew little of the former and enlisted too heavy a hand in the latter.

The captain nodded in complete confidence. He regretted nothing he had done in the course of his military duties to dismantle, or at least dilute, the fear that High Inquisitor Tremayne inspired. His service record and that of the personnel aboard the *Interrogator* was without blemish, asserting, at least in his mind, that respect was a superior motivation than fear.

Meeting Tremayne's orders with a thin smile and consummate bowing of the head had made him one of the most distinguished officers in the Fleet. No other would be so bold as to even meet the Inquisitor's menacing face, with its equally sinister cybernetic replacements. And while the captain's efforts were met with cold disdain and neutrality, he persevered, hoping to influence the Emperor's infamous servant with a small measure of his loyalty and willingness to serve.



"What did it matter?" he whispered, startled by the sound of his own voice. The captain paused, cocking his head to one side as the echo reverberated between the narrow walls of the waiting chamber. Chiding himself for the outburst, he pursed his lips as that hollow feeling dug itself deeper into the pit of his stomach, where the root of all his suppressed fears had lain dormant, until this ignobling day.

Indeed, what did it matter. His relationship to the deceased Captain Nolaan was an unwritten blight on his reputation, one that would inevitably doom him. And his fate would be no different than the others who had been Nolaan's trusted advisors and formal companions. High Inquisitor Tremayne had made that distinction very clear, starting with Nolaan's summary execution on the bridge of the *Interrogator*. And in the aftermath, not one who had called Nolaan friend and mentor was alive to mourn him, except for himself. And that was soon to change.

Vharing swallowed convulsively, remembering Tremayne's wrath. He shuddered with the recollection of Captain Nolaan's gray, stricken face as the troopers dragged his body from the bridge and into the corridor for expeditious disposition. If Tremayne's justice was as predictable as the black void of the *Nharqis'li*, he was next in line.

He straightened the collar of his uniform and adjusted the tilt of his cap. A patriotic cant learned during his tenure at the Imperial Naval Academy came to mind and the young captain took a sudden rush of optimism from the words. The power of those memories instilled him with the courage to face Tremayne as he would face any man in a position of power -- with respect and deference rather than fear. After all, it was not his command that had sent a full squadron of Imperial TIE bombers to the cloudy, defenseless world of Qlothos.

His subordinate, the ambitious senior lieutenant, had picked up some peculiar signals from the nearby planet. It was a frequency that nearly matched a set of earlier transmission codes that had been intercepted from an Alliance operative. Suspecting a hidden Rebel garrison, the senior lieutenant sent the TIE bombers to destroy it.

All this had transpired while the captain laid asleep in his bed. He was only awakened by the lieutenant after the facts were collected and the casualties calculated. There were only minimal injuries to report, no damages to craft or equipment. But nearly 60 civilians, most of them prominent Imperial citizens, were dead -- among them a high-ranking Kuat Drive Yards engineer, his wife, and two sons who were on holiday in the capital.

Evidently, the cloudy blanket of atmosphere covering the planet played havoc on the identification beacons built into the concussion missiles. One went astray and demolished a secluded section of the residential community, which lay only a kilometer from the suspected Rebel compound. Hours after the fatalities were counted, Lord Tremayne's summons had come through directly. And without the added apprehension of his military aide to share in his inner torment, the captain came to meet with the High Inquisitor alone.

But now, he regretted that decision. The briefest contact with another human, however succinct, might have eased his anxiety and given him something to dwell on besides this impending meeting.

The industrious senior com-scan officer would have been an excellent choice. A family man and father, he was an incessant talker -- one reason the captain had overlooked him as his military aide. A loyal and competent leader, the com-scan officer always had time to devote to the love of his wife, nearly 300 light years away, and to the newly born child he had never seen, except through holos and rare face-to-face transmissions.

The balance seemed to anchor the talkative officer in a way the captain had come to admire and finally resent. But after today, all that would change. After assuring High Inquisitor Tremayne that the ambitious senior lieutenant would be punished to the fullest extent -- court-martialed, convicted of manslaughter, the destruction of Imperial property, and harassment of loyal Imperial citizens -- the captain would promote the com-scan officer as his new advisor and begin to share in this esoteric life.

The door to Tremayne's chamber abruptly opened. The captain turned curtly on his heel and saluted as the Dark Adept stepped into the room. "High Inquisitor Tremayne, I have a full report into Senior Lieutenant Leeds' blundering --" His voice was arrested by the lancing pain that assailed his throat.

* * *



As the invisible grip intensified, the captain fell to his knees. He winced as the small bones at the base of his skull cracked audibly under the pressure. Unable to breathe, he found himself sprawled on the cold glare of the waiting room floor. He closed his eyes in an effort to compose himself.

His mind began to flounder for lack of oxygen; and he remembered the stress exercise at the Academy where his colleagues and he were subjected to a panic test in a room full of noxious fumes. Half-blinded and nearly unconscious, he was the last to emerge -- the only one with the courage, or foolish pride as many called it, to remain longer than any of the others. But in this new test, there were fatal consequences. Here the captain was fully cognizant of what was happening to him. There would be no noxious fumes to dim his senses and lessen the blow. He could feel every sensation in vivid detail, from the cold kiss of the deck plate against his palms to the coarse fabric of his uniform as it chafed his elbows and knees.

Unable to raise his head and beseech Tremayne for a second chance, the young captain could only stare into the flowing black hem of the Adept's robes. As his consciousness waned, he imagined himself being drawn into that black fabric and into an alternate world as dark and starless as the *Nharqis'* nebula surrounding his ship.

What a fitting end to my life, he thought with numb pleasure. The first small bone broke beneath the pressure and he felt his body relax.

* * *

Born into a prominent bloodline and class, Jovan Vharing attended the Imperial Naval Academy, a decision made for him by traditional family dictates rather than of his own accord. But there were no regrets to that course; and he delved deeply into the best of himself to impress mentors and superior officers alike. For his concentrated efforts in detail and accuracy, he graduated in the top two percent of his class -- a distinguishing achievement. Newly commissioned as a lieutenant, he went on to a prestigious posting as senior tracking officer aboard a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer.

His ambition and eye for competent and cost-effective action made an early reputation for him -- then a newly graduated officer, serving in the desolate Outer Rim, in the area of space commonly referred to as the wild frontier. And while it was no auspicious duty for an officer of his caliber, it was to be a short-lived tenure with many notable accomplishments that would earn him the sympathetic eye of Captain Nolaan. Having also served on the Outer Rim as a junior officer, Nolaan took an instant liking to Vharing. To spite several of his

junior officers, Nolaan called in several favors and arranged for Vharing's transfer -- to the bridge of the *Interrogator*, where he made no attempts to shield his partiality.

Within one year, Vharing would live up to the high expectations set for him by his ill-fated mentor. After Nolaan's untimely execution, Vharing became one of the youngest men to achieve the rank of captain. As such, he would be one of the youngest officers to ever receive command of an Imperial II Star Destroyer. And with it, he inherited the burden of Tremayne's exacting demands and the resentment of every Imperial officer on the bridge.

Death was a shadowy cloak surrounding the captaincy of the *Interrogator*. Promotion was by succession -- the kind of succession one sees in a toppling house of sabacc cards. Vharing's promotion to captain was simply a complicated ploy by his executive colleagues to stay well out of Lord Tremayne's omniscient shadow. Vharing, as did his predecessor, would serve as a buffer. When the next blunder surfaced, when the next inaccuracy arose, his would be the name spoken by Tremayne and his would be the neck crushed by the wrath of the High Inquisitor.

So as with all things, Vharing threw himself, mentally and physically, into the endless pursuit of perfection. His was the highest efficiency rating in the fleet and his men the most steadfast and loyal. At a formal dinner for the executive staff of the *Interrogator*, Vharing was forced to fend off the curious inquiries of his fellow officers, who for the last six months had stood by and gawked in envy of his ability to motivate men and support staff, even under the most extreme circumstances. When asked what was his single, greatest achievement, Vharing replied, "Serving under High Inquisitor Tremayne."

A moment of quiet met the comment; the jovial atmosphere usurped by a darker, fearsome mood. Staring at each other and then at Vharing in turn, the assembled Imperial officers were speechless and deferred to the talents of their more outspoken members.



"Are you insane, Vharing?" General Parnet whispered. The disgruntled officer glanced over his shoulders, as if expecting High Inquisitor Tremayne to be nearby in the shadows, listening.

"Oh come, gentleman," Vharing scolded, raising his goblet in a toast. "The man is not so dreadful as all that -- oppressive, demanding, unforgiving. He's no different than our drill mentors back at the Academy or any of the superior officers under whom we served before our grand appointments to executive commission."

"And there's your mistake, Vharing," Parnet said evenly. His cruel, handsome face was as expressionless as the shadows flanking the corners of the room. "Failure at the Academy was expulsion. Failure in the line of duty oft times means re-assignment to some shameful task, demotion, perhaps court-martial in the worst cases. Here--" He put his goblet clown to

candidly decline the toast to Tremayne. "Here the penalty for failure is death. And that my friend, is the longest fall any man can take -- alone or with his friends." Parnet paused and glanced around the table at each of his colleagues in turn, waiting for a consensus from the group.

"Well spoken," Lieutenant Uland concurred. He swallowed the entire portion of his wine and set the goblet aside as the first warm charge rushed through him, warding off the intoxicating chill brought on by Tremayne's name.

Vharing met Parnet's statement with a thin smile, marveling at the black mockery of fear behind the General's insipid eyes. "Then to Death, gentlemen," he raised his goblet, "the longest fall."

* * *

As Vharing's face met the cold embrace of the deck floor, he was as a dead man. Hot surges of agonizing sensation lanced through his battered skull and he awoke from that desperate state -- alive by every indication of the pain that swept through his heightened senses.

With a child's wondrous delight, he experienced the sharp agonies of living -- the nagging aches and stiffness of his joints, the twisted pinch of his uniform, chafing uncomfortably at his skin. One of his insignia pins had broken in the fall and was piercing the muscle of his chest. *Dead men do not bleed*, he thought to himself, feeling the warm adhesive of his blood against the fabric of his uniform.

There was a dull roaring in his ears as his physical faculties returned. A momentary stab of pain confessed itself to be a separated rib, possibly two, suffered in the fall to the waiting room floor. His right index finger would not move on command and any effort to coerce it brought a secondary wave of sensory anguish. And there was more. Something was terribly wrong -- he could not breath.

In desperation, Vharing searched the room, his lethargic eyes slow to focus on his surroundings. The delay in his vision brought terrifying images back to his bewildered brain, making the few objects in the immediate area seem gigantic in comparison to his frail, battered body. This appalling effect redoubled his terror, prolonging the agony of his asphyxiation.

Why doesn't he finish it! Vharing demanded in his mind, unable to speak. His throat was on fire. The salted aftertaste of blood repulsed him and caused him to gag, aggravating his desperate circumstances.

Then as his will to survive conquered the army of dull senses numbing his brain, Vharing opened his mouth. The frigid chill of the waiting room sliced at his tongue as he took his first gasp of air. The experience was a miserable agony to endure; the icy sting swept through his mouth and then into his nostrils.

Vharing coughed, continuing to wheeze as his lungs began to function. "Alive?" he rasped, startled by the hoarse growl of his voice. *Had Tremayne left him for dead? Impossible.*

Slowly rising from the floor, Vharing swallowed with deliberate caution. He closed his eyes, near fainting, as the agony in the back of his neck intensified. There was undoubtedly some damage caused by Tremayne's wrath, but nothing the surgeon droids in the Interrogator's sick bay could not fathom. Spreading his fingers wide and wiggling his toes inside the hardened leather of his boots, Vharing grinned and turned for the door.

Pausing momentarily, he stared at his reflection in the observation glass, noticing the thin trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth and from one nostril. Quickly pulling the handkerchief from his pocket, he moistened the corner and dabbed at the wound. The injury at his chin would bruise by morning, but he was not worried. He would wear the bruise as a mark of distinction among his colleagues.

Hurrying through the bulkhead door, Vharing stepped into the corridor and abruptly fell back against the wall. The overhead illumination grids were blinding to him. Hands shielding his eyes, the young captain blinked back painful tears and quickly made his way through the wide passage. His heart was pounding frantically in beat to the patriotic cant that still lingered in his memory.

Everything was so poignantly clear. The detail of the deck plates, an organized mosaic of tiles along the corridor floor. Though indiscernible to the preoccupied mind, he could see the variations to shade and texture. The illumination grid panels troubling from overhead were spaced exactly one and one half meters apart, two meters in the corners where the corridors intersected, and three meters where the passage led off to the enormous labyrinth of the officers' quarters. A sanitizing chemical taint rose in the air, stinging his nostrils for the first time as his heightened senses allowed him to experience, with fullness, the world around him.

Yes, everything was exquisitely clear to him, including his plans for Lieutenant Leeds! He would call a complete escort of Imperial stormtroopers to accompany him to the bridge. Then he would head directly to the command center and he would arrest the ambitious lieutenant in front of everyone. And at the expense of several favors of his own, he would oversee the court-martial procedures himself. Admiral Hennat, as yet a keen friend of his, would gladly preside over the entire affair, insuring a judgment of gross negligence against the lieutenant. Leeds would become the scapegoat, buried in a list of charges ranging from murder to treason, while Vharing's own record remained perfectly clean and clear.

After snapping the restraints on Leeds' wrists himself, the young captain would summon his com-scan officer, Lieutenant Waleran front and center. With great ceremony, befitting a field promotion in combat, he would advocate the industrious young officer to the rank of senior lieutenant in front of the entire bridge crew. And as Nolaan had done for him, Vharing would take Waleran under his wing, ensuring him a place on the executive staff as his personal military

At the end of corridor, the turbolift was situated between an auxiliary maintenance shaft and a small storage room. Closing his eyes, Vharing rubbed at his neck, barely able to tolerate the excruciating pain, which seemed to intensify as he moved closer to the turbolift. His hands gently caressed the area under his throat and he a felt the disfigured swelling of his larynx and the distended glands along the sides of his neck.

Nothing the medical droids can't see to, he told himself. His tongue was also swollen, all but blocking the airway to his lungs. Vharing paused, leaning against a heavy equipment chest. Loosening the collar of his uniform, he swallowed a cool draft of air, in the hopes that the chill might alleviate some of his discomfort.

Puzzled that he had not yet reached the turbolift, the captain fought off a bout of panic. His heart quickened as he opened his eyes. For every step he had taken, it appeared as if the lift entrance had moved three steps beyond him. Vharing closed his eyes again, rubbing the sensation back into them as the numbing cold of Tremayne's waiting room prevailed over his senses.

"Delirium," he whispered, willing the tension and anxiety to leave him.

When Vharing again opened his eyes, he was standing on the bridge of the *Interrogator*. What a breathtaking sight she was -- a tribute to the perfection and dedication of the Imperial technicians that created her! Lieutenant Leeds was nowhere on the flight bridge. Vharing smiled with conceited satisfaction, reminding himself to pay a visit to the destitute ambitious officer, if only to offer a few choices as to his next career, as foreman in one of the Emperor's spice mines.

Vharing nearly laughed aloud at the thought. Brushing his hand reflectively over his lips, he took a deep breath and clasped his hands behind his back. He swayed rhythmically back and forth on his heels, conscious of the habit but too intrigued with the rapture of living to care.

Across from him, Lieutenant Waleran was speaking with the navigation team. A set of new insignias adorned his uniformed breast, casting a steady, proud glare over the dramatic gray of his formal command appointments. It pleased Vharing to see the newly promoted Senior Lieutenant so fully engaged in his work and enjoying it. He seemed well at ease on the bridge and from the atmosphere, the crew was at ease with him too.

Ahead of them, the nebula was breaking up into fragmented sections of discernible stars and distant planets. The bridge crew was preparing to leave this sector, bracing themselves for the jump into hyperspace. *When had the order been given?* Shrugging off that uncertainty, Vharing straightened his broad shoulders. He wanted to pose for the crew to show his complete confidence in the new bridge officer. In his absence, Waleran must have received the orders and was prepared to carry them out.

Vharing raised his chin with a measure of pride. The action caused a crippling streak of pain to shoot through him. There was a literal explosion of sensory information at the base of his skull as his brain shuddered in agony. Gritting his teeth against the anguish, the captain forced his body into a rigid pose. Once he had given the order for the jump into hyperspace, he would officially turn the bridge over to Waleran and would retire immediately to the medical bay for a complete physical examination.

As the pilots signaled the all clear for the jump to hyperspace, Vharing opened his mouth to give the command -- a loud, tortured wheezing escaped his throat. He tried to swallow but the tightness in his throat would not give. Lieutenant Waleran turned to him, as if looking through him, and then turned back to the pilots' station. Straightening his shoulders in a haughty imitation of his commanding officer, Waleran nodded to his subordinate and gave the order for the jump to hyperspace.

Vharing winced beneath the onslaught of the hyperdrive engines as the shriek of the motivators jarred his bones, right down to his teeth. There was a secondary explosion of light and color as the tell-tale points of stars elongated and stretched across the viewscreen, becoming the seamless fabric of hyperspace. As the radiant glow intensified, Vharing squinted, desperately afraid to close his eyes against the brilliance. For to close them would mean never to open them, never to see this world, or exist within it again. But the glare was too intense; the pressure at the base of his skull too powerful. He was forced to escape into a world where there was no light, no sound -- just blackness.

Neck broken, his spinal cord pulverized at the base of his skull, Captain Jovan Vharing was dead. His head swung listlessly back and forth from his shoulders as two stormtroopers dragged his corpse from High Inquisitor Tremayne's waiting room.